

VZCZCXYZ0003
RR RUEHWEB

DE RUEHYN #1016/01 1511225
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
R 311225Z MAY 09
FM AMEMBASSY SANAA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 2024
INFO RUEHGB/AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD 0091

C O N F I D E N T I A L SANAA 001016

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/AAP:MBLONG
BAGHDAD FOR LGURIAN

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/30/2019
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [YM](#)
SUBJECT: POTHOLES ON THE ROAD TO 2011 PARLIAMENTARY
ELECTIONS

REF: A. SANAA 996
[1](#)B. SANAA 942

Classified By: Ambassador Stephen A. Seche for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) Twenty-three months prior to parliamentary elections scheduled for April 2011, the deadline for the parties to reach mutually acceptable electoral reform is much closer than it appears. Neither side appears to be moving in the direction of resolving the outstanding disagreements on the electoral process. In spite of efforts by the electoral commission to address technical issues during the impasse, party foot-dragging will only make it harder bring about needed reform and hold elections as scheduled. End Summary

What must be done to hold elections in April 2011

[1](#)2. (C) Unrest in Yemen has recently grabbed headlines (reftels), but one month after the postponement of parliamentary elections and 23 months before those elections are now due to be held, the countdown clock is ticking and very little is being done. Country Director Peter Williams of the International Federation of Electoral Systems (IFES) told POL/E Chief on May 28 that the various parties involved in the debate over reforming Yemen's electoral system realistically have only 5 months to resolve their differences and author a mutually acceptable program for reform.

[1](#)3. (C) Williams clarified why the deadline was so short. The opposition Joint Meeting Parties (JMP), whose threat to boycott the parliamentary elections ultimately brought about their delay, has made clear in its public statements and private discussions with POL/E Chief that changing Yemen's current "first past the post" system to some form of a proportional list system is a mandatory prerequisite for JMP participation.

[1](#)4. (C) This demand moves the deadline for agreement forward in two ways. According to Williams, organizations that handle technical aspects of elections processes agree that the implementation, in a manner consistent with international standards, of a new electoral system requires at least 12 months. Additionally, as Yemen's current electoral system is spelled out in the country's constitution, changing it will require amending the constitution and therefore a national referendum. Williams estimates that from the time such a referendum is proposed in Yemen's Parliament its implementation will require at least six months. Therefore, the program must be settled at least 18 months before the scheduled April 2011 elections, which sets the deadline in October 2009.

What the Parties are Doing

15. (C) Thus far there has been no progress towards coming to a mutually acceptable plan that will allow elections to take place. Further, neither the ruling General People's Congress (GPC) nor the JMP are showing any urgency to begin a dialogue on the topic. On May 17, Sultan Barkani, the head of the GPC Parliamentary Bloc, told POL/E Chief that no dialogue was taking place. The opposition, said Barkani, "are waiting for some sort of invitation to start." He added that no such invitation was forthcoming. Assistant Secretary General Mohamed al-Sadi of the opposition Islah party told POL/E Chief on May 19 that it is not the lack of an invitation that is delaying the dialogue, but rather Yemen's unstable political situation. "The agreement to delay the elections says that there must be a 'suitable political environment' for the debates. It is President Saleh's job to bring about that environment." When asked would constitute a suitable environment, Sadi indicated that at least the political upheaval in Yemen's south would have to be calmed.

16. (C) Secretary General Yassin Saeed Noman of the opposition Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP) sees an even longer road to agreement. "Dialogue with the GPC has stopped," he told POL/E Chief on May 26. "It has stopped because they have forgotten all the other issues and are only willing to discuss the elections. If the greater issues (decentralization of power, non-electoral political reform) are not addressed, we are afraid there will be no Yemen to hold elections. The real reform must start before there can be electoral reform."

The Prospects for Progress

17. (C) Resident Director Heather Therrien of the National Democratic Institute (NDI) complained to POL/E Chief on May 26 that JMP party members feel burned by their past dealing with the GPC and therefore are unwilling to take accept piecemeal reforms that could start the ball rolling. "They want it all at once," she said, "and I don't blame them. If history is any guide, the GPC will get them to accept reforming the Supreme Council for Elections and Referenda (SCER) and ignore all the other issues." GPC Parliamentarian Nabil Basha was even more pessimistic. "Before the elections were delayed," he told POL/E Chief on May 25, "I told people that if they were (delayed), there might never be another election in Yemen. Now I am afraid I was right." Presidential advisor Abdulkarim al-Eryani announced on May 30 that the dialogue mentioned in the agreement to delay elections will begin soon. At the same time, opposition figures called for a boycott of any dialogue with the ruling party until those arrested during demonstrations in Yemen's south are freed.

SCER Soldiers on in Silence

18. (C) While the parties are failing to resolve the political issues related to the election process, the SCER is quietly continuing to deal with technical issues. With the SCER's cooperation, IFES has brought in a forensic accountant and computer expert to audit the voter registration lists. While this process is not secret (it is included in IFES' plan of action), it is being undertaken very quietly. Williams entreated POL/E Chief not to mention it, particularly to contacts in Yemen's political parties, for fear that it would become a political issue and therefore be stalled as well.

Comment

19. (C) Neither the GPC nor the JMP appear to have learned anything from the failure of the April 2009 elections. Neither has budged from their entrenched position and neither appears willing to make the first move. Valuable time is

being wasted and that will only make achieving reform and holding the elections as scheduled more difficult. End Comment.
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